

Michael Wallin



BY TOM LEWY, THE CHRONICLE

Michael Wallin said of his award-winning film 'Decodings': 'I thought it would screen a couple of times and then . . . sit on the shelves'

# Personal Story Decoded In Bits of Old Footage

BY CALVIN AHLGREN  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

**"D**ECODINGS" is the 13th film listed by Michael Wallin since he began turning out his technically adventurous, amusing and often experimental works in 1968. For Wallin, the 13th time proved the charm: "Decodings" won a 1988 Phelan

Award, given to local film makers, took a first prize at the Athens Film Festival and a Grand Prize at the Thomas Edison Black Maria Festival, and was accepted for the prestigious Whitney Biennial '89 in New York.

Though in some ways the multiple nod acknowledges his longtime devotion to craft, and even his artistic pedigree — Wallin studied with

film makers Bruce Baillie, James Broughton and Peter Kubelka — the 41-year-old *cinéaste* was surprised at the interest his latest film generated. "I thought it would screen a couple of times and then go into Canyon [Cinema, the independent film collection/rental facility where he worked for 8½ years, and of whose board he is still a member] and sit on the shelves," he said.

He was the more nonplussed because his latest film is such a departure from previous work. In "Tall Grass" (1968/1980, 15 minutes, silent, color), "Monitoring the Unstable Earth" (1980, 20 minutes, color), "Fearful Symmetry" (1981, 15 minutes, silent, color) and "Along the Way" (1983, 20 minutes, color) — all showing with "Decodings" Tuesday night at Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley — Wallin deals with images from the natural world, recorded by and interpreted through his camera lens. "Decodings" (1988, 15 minutes, black and white) uses images gleaned from industrial and commercial film from the 1940s and 1960s.

Coming out of a period of several dry years during which personal problems — the breakup of a 10-year relationship and a months-long crisis with an injured back — kept him from film making, Wallin had approached "Decodings" as an opportunity for both renewal and breakthrough. He had written a very personal statement that he hoped to use as the basis for a script, but realized that its very intimacy — Wallin called it a "psychosexual



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Michael Wallin's "Decodings" and other films screen at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at Pacific Film Archive, 2625 Durant Avenue in Berkeley.





A pulsing heart is one of the many images used in 'Decodings'

tale" — could work against the film process he envisioned. "It was too confessional, too obvious," he said. In its raw state, "it would have worked to close off instead of open up the images."

So he turned to an old friend, doctor and writer Michael Blumlein, to fashion the piece into a script. What emerged from their collaboration is an elliptical track that chases poetry, science fiction, satire and narrative fiction through a story charged with personal emotions that flash like summer lightning.

"Of course, it was a scary process," he said. "I'd never given up any creative control" in film making. "Basically I want my films to be expressions of *my* vision. So it was a difficult process, but ultimately very satisfying ... I was getting some objective feedback from somebody who knew what was happening."

Wallin perceived the visual end — his first use of found footage — as a novelty that he believed he could handle with professional detachment. "I thought I could be

more ruthless because the footage was not my own. But once I'd chosen about an hour's worth to work with, aiming toward a 15-minute film, it became a challenge."

That was based in his intent both to avoid clichés of the genre ("fascinating, but usually dealt with

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## *'It was a scary process'*

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in very trite fashion: for easy laughs or stock value or to hammer home political messages") and to pursue the personal statement that began with his own writing. "Going through these thousands and thousands of feet of film, I realized I wanted to use this ["Decodings"] to say something about myself." That viewpoint worked in his favor, he said. "Some of my film maker friends have said, 'I could see you having shot those images.' It's of the same period and style as when I was growing up."

The old radio drama feel to the narrative suits the archaic look of the images, without forced attempts at matching specifics. The pacing of the film proceeds with the seeming inevitability of a musical composition. One laughs at vignettes of Chaplinesque antics — a

*See Page 40*



# WALLIN

*Continued From Page 37*

group of boys piling into the surf, a stunt driver in a bulky old coupe bursting through a wall of flame — or hushes at a brief retelling of a sexual encounter, or flinches at the sight of a beating human heart surgically revealed in an operating-room sequence so baldly presented that at first it seems to be trick photography.

The images were “somehow terribly evocative of my past,” Wallin said, “all the resonances and subtexts of things we were forbidden to talk and think about when I was growing up . . . It’s still fascinating to me to use this material that had such rich psychological underpinnings . . . One of the aspects I felt was successful was the way the text broadened the implications of the images, and the way the images were pushed into metaphor.”

Both technically and emotionally, “Decodings” represents a stretch for Wallin. His previous three works, “Monitoring the Unstable Earth,” “Fearful Symmetry” and “Along the Way,” are characterized by technical density and a sort of mechanical restlessness (Wallin calls this “camera strategies”). To be sure, the films are successful on their own terms, and offer much to intrigue a viewer, from transcendently lit seashores to San Francisco skylines blissed out

in rivers of fog, to modern buildings that pulse and glow with an unearthly intensity.

The time of making the trilogy “was a very creative period for me,” Wallin said. “I’d come on different ways of moving and framing the camera — all those pans and tilts and using the polarizing filter. Basically I was experimenting with all the tools available to me, short of optical printing.”

His aim, he said, was to catch the familiar in ways that would break through bonds of habitual perception, stimulating the viewer to see anew. “I felt I’d come across a technique that enabled me to convey a sense of being somewhere, in a place that was quite powerful: the colors, the light, the forms, all that stuff. I wanted to transcend the notion of just having the films be seen as records of being somewhere.”

**A**FTER the exhilaration of making “Decodings,” Wallin said he is ready to try further collaboration. His next film, however, will hew to his original line of filming the natural world, not rummaging in found-footage bins. Tuesday’s PFA showing of his work closes a tour that’s taken him to the East Coast and around the country. In the spring of 1990, he said, the Museum of Modern Art in New York will give a one-man show of his films. “After that,” he quipped, “I’ll retire. It’ll be the Boardwalk and Park Place of film making.” ■